

Wonders & Worries

Professional support for children
through a parent's illness.

We will, together.

A Monster Calls – Movie Discussion Guide with Wonders & Worries

Summary

This movie focuses on a boy whose mom is seriously ill, and the courage he generates by calling on his monster. The young boy, Conor, struggles with guilt, anger, bullying at school, separation from those he loves and the unknown. These challenges are not resolved clearly at the end of the movie, and may evoke an emotional response and a desire to discuss the story.

How a Parent's Illness Affects Their Children

A parent's diagnosis of cancer or other serious illness has a profound impact on their children. Approximately 1 in 5 people diagnosed with cancer have a child under 18 living at home. Parents are often uncertain how to start a conversation about their disease, and may believe that saying nothing is the best way to protect their children. However, research shows that children benefit from strong family communication around an illness.

Children are incredibly perceptive and intensely aware of changes in their family. Left to navigate a parent or caregiver's illness on their own, children may draw incorrect conclusions, like thinking that the cancer or illness is their fault. They may also misinterpret changes in their parents' behavior to mean that they aren't loved or valued. The good news is that when provided with thoughtful, supportive interventions, children and teenagers have the capacity to not only cope, but to grow and thrive.

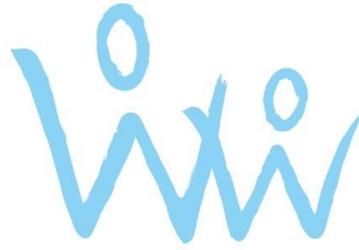
4 Ways to Support Children Who Have a Parent with Cancer or Serious Illness

1. Provide Age-appropriate Information about the Disease

Find out what the child already knows and clarify misperceptions. For example, you can't catch cancer like you catch a cold. Explain the disease in child-friendly, age-appropriate terms. Tell the child about the treatment plan and how it will impact the child. For instance, who will pick them up after school during treatments.

2. Allow for Open and Ongoing Conversations

Encourage children and teens to ask questions, state feelings and voice concerns. Give children permission to express positive *and* negative emotions. Understand that reactions may include denial, sadness, anger and fear, as well as regressive behaviors like thumb sucking or stress symptoms like stomach aches.



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3. Know and Acknowledge High Stress Times, including:

- When the parent is first diagnosed
- Real or symbolic separations, such as a parent not being able to drive car pool
- Seeing the parent visibly sick or upset
- Bodily changes in the parent, such as hair loss or medical equipment connected to the body

4. Tell the School

Acting out at school is often an early indicator that a child needs extra support. Studies show that parental cancer leads to a decline in academic performance and an inability to concentrate. School can play a supportive role by providing a predictable routine and offering a distraction from the illness.

Keep the Discussion Going

- How can you be a good friend if you know someone who has a sick parent?
- Have you ever felt invisible? Is it worse to be invisible or to stand out?
- Why did Conor's grandmother not get mad at him when he destroyed her living room?
- What do you think happens to Conor's family after the end of the film?
- How have you used art and imagination when you're going through a difficult time?

Resources for Parents and Caregivers

- **Tips for Talking About Illness & Cancer** – how to start the conversation with children and teenagers: www.wondersandworries.org/talktips
- **Recommended Reading** – by age and topic to help parents, teens and children understand & cope: www.wondersandworries.org/read
- **Kids Worry Too** – explaining the hospitalization of a family member: www.nebraskamed.com/child-life-services/resources
- **Learning and Living with Cancer** – navigating the topic of cancer at school - for children, their parents and teachers: www.scholastic.com/livestrong/

Organizations

- **Wonders & Worries** – Provides free, professional support to children through a parent's illness: www.wondersandworries.org and info@wondersandworries.org
- **Alliance for Grieving Children** – membership organization for grief support providers that also offers grief resources: www.childrengrieve.org
- **Cancer Support Community** – global network offering cancer support to those touched by cancer: www.cancersupportcommunity.org